

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH COMBATS RAPE AND
SEXUAL ASSAULT**

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month

(RICHMOND, Va.) – Rape. Sexual assault. The very words evoke intense feelings of fear and images of violence. They are profound invasions of privacy that can strip victims of their dignity. They also are major public health problems nationwide and in Virginia.

According to the National Victim Center in Arlington, Va., A woman is sexually assaulted every two to three minutes in the United States, The U. S. has the highest rate of rape of any country that publishes data on sexual assault, 13 times higher than Great Britain and 20 times higher than Japan.

In Virginia, one in four women and one in eight men have been victims of sexual assault, most when they were children, according to a 2003 Virginia Department of Health (VDH) survey. According to the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance, the costs associated with sexual assaults total approximately \$3.6 billion a year, including costs for initial police response, medical care, property loss, lost wages and pain and suffering. The figure does not include costs of investigation, prosecution or incarceration.

The health consequences of sexual assault are significant, too. It can affect the physical, mental, social and emotional well being of victims and is associated with unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, gynecological complications, depression, post traumatic stress disorder and suicide.

“The Virginia Department of Health is committed to eliminating sexual violence,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. “We want to help families and communities prevent violence against women and the victimization of children.”

Sexual violence includes forced, coerced, manipulated or unwanted touching, kissing or sexual intercourse and verbal harassment. Individuals, especially men, can help prevent sexual violence by focusing on the behaviors and attitudes of potential offenders.

- Speak up when other men say degrading things about women.
- Teach boys and girls about healthy relationships.
- Denounce images of male violence against women or degrading images of women.
- Speak up when you see sexually abusive behavior.

(more)

No one is ever to blame or at fault for being a victim of sexual violence. Offenders are always responsible for their behavior. However, there are things you can do to reduce your risk of becoming a victim of sexual assault.

- Communicate your desires and set limits clearly.
- Know that you have the right to set sexual limits in any relationship.
- Trust your instincts. If a situation or behavior makes you uncomfortable it's OK to leave.
- Beware of the effects of alcohol and drugs. Offenders often use them to wear down a potential victim's resolve.

VDH's efforts to reduce rape and sexual violence include several projects that address the behaviors and attitudes of men. The "Isn't She a Little Young" campaign enlists the aid of men when they see their buddies pursuing young girls. The Men of Strength campaign focuses on redefining masculine strength and how young men relate to women. It includes training for human service providers in how to involve men and boys in preventing violence toward women. The White Ribbon Campaign is a grass roots effort that denounces all forms of violence against women. For more information about any of these efforts contact Robert.Franklin@vdh.virginia.gov or visit www.vahealth.org/civp.

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